

How will the #SDGs differ from the MDGs?

As the excitement around the SDGs summit comes to an end, Oxfam's Duncan Green and Takumo Yamada look to the future and the challenges that lie ahead in implementing and following through on the ambition of the goals. Among the multiple possible avenues of influence, they ask which will generate the greatest traction, ensuring legacy of the goals is borne out in deeds, not just words.

This post is part of the Africa at LSE, IGC and South Asia at LSE cross-blog series on the Global Goals for Sustainable Development.

Will the SDGs be bigger, better and more universal than their predecessor, or a bafflingly complex mishmash of issues that fail to generate traction on decision making? They could go either way.



The UN Headquarters was the focal point during the announcement of the new Global Goals for Sustainable Development Photo Credit: USAID via Flickr CC BY 2.0 (<http://bit.ly/1RdnwCU>)

Now that the list is finalised, most of the SDG circus will declare victory and go home, while the remainder focuses on implementation, where much of the policy attention will focus on financing and a geekfest on metrics and indicators. Both are important. But for us, the decisive issue is the important-but-boring question of the mechanisms for reporting and following up on SDG commitments.

Who/what are the SDGs supposed to influence? There are at least four answers to that question:

1. Developing country budgets and policies
2. Wider social norms about rights and the duties of governments and others
3. Aid volumes and priorities (i.e. a re-run of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were mainly effective as an aid lobbying tool)
4. Developed country budgets and policies

Of these the first two are the most promising: aid is falling as a percentage of government revenue, while the SDGs seem unlikely to have much influence on the policies of developed countries (hope we're wrong of course –the Swedes are making the SDGs central to all ministries' benchmarks, ensuring policy coherence with foreign policies including climate, migration/refugees, aid, trade, tax cooperation etc., and calling on the other rich countries to do the same. The Prime

Minister has formed a “**High Level Group**” with eight other national leaders, including Angela Merkel and Dilma Rousseff).

For each possible channel of influence, we need to think through how the SDGs could exert real traction. In the case of developing country budgets and policies, this could be through:

- Peer pressure: already in New York, some ‘vanguard governments’ (Colombia, Gabon, Indonesia) were talking about internalising the SDGs in domestic processes. They could be effective sources of pressure on their neighbours and others to follow suit. What kind of platform or reporting process could help them do so?
- National media: always a good source of pressure on decision makers. What sort of data and media operation around the SDGs is likely to grab their interest at regular intervals over the next 15 years?
- Civil Society: what do national CSOs need in order to make the SDGs an effective part of their advocacy repertoire? Civil Society gets several name checks in the final SDGs communiqué agreed by the UN, but is under siege in many countries. The implementation process could help by clearly and consciously requiring civil society participation as an integral part of implementation.

The UN Summit **final document** sets out some encouraging but rather vague outlines for how the implementation process will be developed. A focus on the SDGs (both implementation and review) being country-led (good, we don’t want a media circus in New York every few years with no influence on the ground) and a role for stakeholders beyond government (private sector, civil society), which should help keep things honest.

But very little of this is mandatory – lots of ‘voluntary’, ‘we encourage’, ‘countries can try X or Y’, which leaves lots of boltholes for governments who don’t like the scrutiny.

The detail is left to the UN Secretary General, who has been asked to produce a report on the way forward by early 2016, and a **High Level Political Forum**, which will report back next July and will then have a ‘central role’ in follow up, with a meeting every four years, and an annual progress report from the UN Secretary General in between times. The details on the Forum on the UN website are still sketchy (e.g. who’s on it), but if you are interested in whether the SDGs generate genuine traction, or a lot of hot air, that’s the place to watch over the next few years.

Our dream result? Pending **some proper research**, perhaps some combination of regional league tables that identify leaders and laggards and galvanise public and media pressure on government. The New York communiqué stressed opposition to creating new institutions, so perhaps the follow-up mechanisms could learn from and adapt established UN implementation processes like those for the **Commission on the Status of Women** (which gets rave reviews from our boss **Winnie Byanyima**) or the **UN Convention of the Rights of the Child**, where a UN Commission reviews every government’s report on its performance, and has the right to consult non-government agencies for a second opinion.

The worst outcome would be if no-one pays attention to the nuts and bolts of implementation, allowing the SDGs to join the long and ignoble tradition international fora of warm words that have not led to real deeds.

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This post forms part of a cross-blog series on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development run by the **Africa at LSE**, **South Asia at LSE**, and **IGC** blogs. [View more posts in this series.](#)

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